

TEXTS, REASON, AND HOMO LIBER, OR: WHAT I HAVE LEARNED, I'VE LEARNED THROUGH TEXTUAL REASONING, TOGETHER

MICHAEL ZANK

Boston University

With just a little punning and butchery, one may translate the above Latin expression in two ways, one referring to the free man, the other to a man of books. Since the days of the discovery of exotic islands and their scantily-clad aboriginal inhabitants by perfumed and hygienically challenged Europeans, we've been caught in a bind. Is it better for human beings to read books and try and learn from them how to conquer the world, or would it be better for us to leave books, and each other, alone? We associate books with civilization, but the latter is the ambivalent achievement of men and women who may be as ruthless as they are cultivated.

Perhaps it is like having been driven from paradise, but return we cannot. We cannot undo the damage done to our way of thinking and acting, to our entire being conditioned by the texts imposed on us from early on. Freedom from books is impossible. What remains is the

possibility of achieving liberty despite, and perhaps also through the agency of, books.

Learning is, unless I am very much mistaken, about becoming human. Can books, can texts, can textual reasoning help us to become more human?

What I've learned, I've learned in and through the company with others. This is not to say that much solitary reading was not also necessary, but I doubt that reading on one's own can ever be a truly solitary pursuit. Descartes tried the experiment of reducing himself to just himself, or even less, the fact of his thinking, but surely this was a hoax. You are never quite alone, for there is always a book.

And there are others reading as well. Better still, there are those with whom you can converse over what you read. And, behold, you become a little more human every time you share a text, a thought, a problem. This is still a way of coming alive. Why alive? Are we dead without books? Perhaps not. But reading together is an act of non-threatening challenge—for no two people read alike—and hence a stirring experience. At least the West as we know it, along with rabbinic culture as we understand it now, cannot be imagined without the democratizing experience of two and three reading *beyahad*.

The academic profession promises a life of reading, of reasoning with others. It does so as the secular heir to a religious discipline: the study of sacred texts. But all text study is sacred, particularly that which establishes humanity among those who reason over text and with each other. Textual reasoning is a religious act of humanization, one that acts upon you no matter how you situate yourself otherwise (religiously, academically, etc.).

Just as texts are the sources of our commonality, commonality is the condition of all freedom. One can only be free together. One way of being together in freedom is by reasoning with texts. *Homo liber vel per libros liberati*.